20 Nov. 1966

The Grim Who-Killed-Kennedy Game

see this file, Berkeley Barb, 25 Nov. 1966, for comment by Hal Verb

By Joel Pimsleur

THREE YEARS after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy — and two years after the release of the Warren Commission report — there are more questions than ever, and the American public has come full circle in its confusion: from doubt, to belief, to deeper doubt.

A Niagara of books, articles, lectures, radio and TV pronouncements — ranging from the rational to the utterly irresponsible, and challenging not only the procedures but the conclusions of the Commission — have, on the third anniversary of the President's death, created an atmosphere verging on national hysteria.

To "satisfy itself that the truth is known as far as it can be discovered," the Commission published a report consisting of more than 800 pages with findings and conclusions — which relied on 26 supporting volumes of testimony, exhibits and investigative data — totaling nearly 6 million words.

Who's Satisfied?

The FBI alone conducted approximately 25,000 interviews, submitted 2300 reports, totaling 25,400 pages; the Secret Service conducted 1550 interviews, submitting 800 reports totaling 4600 pages.

And who is satisfied? A month after the Commission Report was released, a Lou Harris poll for Oct., 1964, disclosed that 87 per cent of the American people were then convinced that Oswald was the killer and 56 per cent believed he did it alone.

For more than a year and a half, there was virtual silence on the subject. Public acceptance, or at least indifference, was so widespread that there was no point in further poll-taking on the matter.

By last month, however, attitudes had changed drastically. Only 69 per cent of the American people, according to Lou Harris, were now convinced that Oswald was the assassin; and just 33 per cent believed he did it alone.

"UFO, ESP, JFK"

A less formal poll, of radio call-in shows, also reflects the sudden upsurge of public interest and concern. A year ago, the Kennedy assassination was of negligible interest. Today, the subject ranks third, and is moving up fast, behind flying saucers and extra-sensory perception. (Or, as lawyer-author Mark Lane, the Commission's most persistent critic, puts it: "UFO, ESP, JFK.")

Yet it was not merely that old doubts had re-arisen, or new ones appeared, but that there was a whole new aura to the doubting: The suspicions were darker, the insinuations more ominous, the implications more sinister.

And there were signs that the party was getting much, much rougher.

In Washington, Representative Theodore Kupferman of New York, the man who took Mayor John Lindsay's House seat, last month proposed a joint Congressional committee to review the work of the Warren Commission, and determine whether a legislative investigation was in order.

So did Life magazine — itself the recipient of some sharp criticism for its mishandling of critical assassination photos.

Retired Bishop James Pike clambered belatedly aboard the bandwagon to announce that he had become convinced that a "conspiracy hypothesis" was "more credible than the alternative." And he joined an interfaith committee to call on President Johnson to demand the release of all withheld evidence.

Toward the Ghoulish

But with the new wave of doubt had also come another development — an increasing inclination toward the ghoulish. The *Cabinet of Caligari* stories have begun to make the rounds again.

On a major London television program last month, playwright Gore Vidal said he had seen the galleys of William Manchester's forthcoming "authorized version"

of the assassination, and he knew a story that was **not** in the book because it had been deleted.

During the flight back from Dallas in the plane carrying her husband's body, according to Vidal, Jacqueline Kennedy moved to the rear of the plane, where she saw Lyndon Johnson "chuckling" over the casket.

It was that incident, ostensibly, which explained Mrs. Kennedy's subsequent coolness to Mr. Johnson.

Cynicism and Disbelief

That, if for no other reason, such an incident was logistically unlikely (since Mrs. Kennedy never "moved to the rear of the plane" but sat near the body during the entire flight) is beside the point.

The point is that the mood of cynicism and disbelief has shifted into new ground: from anything is possible to everything is probable. The casket story is actually an old one. But where it was once confined to hushed tones in private parlors, it is now getting mass media exposure.

The story was not only broadcast to millions in London (although never picked up by a single wire service), it was then repeated by Mark Lane in San Francisco over the Joe Dolan Show and in Los Angeles on Mort Sahl's Show — an extraordinary exhibition which concluded with Sahl, in a moment of emotional catharsis, peering into the television camera and pleading with the audience:

"I want to know who killed the President. He is a restless spirit even now. I charge the government with suppressing the facts. I charge the Chief Justice with distorting the evidence, and I charge the American people with complicity by their indifference to terror. His blood is on your hands."

This new phenomenon, with all the emotionalism inherent in the story, has also inspired the worst in contemporary, gee-whiz journalism, with sensation mongering and mock-scoop reporting of every unverified rumor that comes down the pike.

Reckless Rehash

One national magazine, Ramparts, in a disturbingly reckless rehash of all the bogeyman stories that have been bruited about for more than two years (most of them supplied by a small town Texas editor whose "ear is tuned into the Dallas gossip"), purported to find some conspiratorial connection between the "mysterious deaths" of 14 people with only the most tenuous ties to the assassination.

Ramparts now reports of "a network of Kennedy assassination buffs, linked coast to coast by bush telegraph of manifold ramifications. When one uncovered a startling new piece of evidence, the information spread like fire through plains grass, until, before the week was out, it was common knowledge among all the operatives of this private intelligence apparat."

Unfortunately, these "startling new pieces of evidence" have evidently remained largely in the bush.

The current issue of Ramparts does reveal that Jack Ruby, seeming to have a passion for parades, "was unaccounted for between 3 and 7:30 p.m. on the 21st — ample time to fly to Houston, observe the motorcade and return."

Getting Silly

Furthermore, Ramparts reports, apparently seriously, that very same day "an obese lady" who looked like Jack Ruby's sister was spotted by an elderly Mexican couple watching the motorcade in San Antonio.

At times, this amateur sleuthing gets unbelievably silly. A Berkeley "underground" newspaper, the Barb, running a series of assassination "exclusives" — exposes in which the paper prints a clue of the week — recently printed a pair of pictures of bald men under the impressive headline: "Proof: Ruby Near When JFK Was Slain."

The "proof" consisted of a picture of Jack Ruby's back, snapped at a Dallas police station, compared with that

of an unidentified man taken outside the Dallas Book Depository Building just after the slaying.

Both men were stocky and balding. Both men had backs. But there the resemblance ended. Under a magnifying glass, the man outside the Texas School Book Depository looked more like Allen Funt than Jack Ruby.

Literary Attack

Still the spate of criticism continues. In the forefront of the attack on the Warren Commission and its findings are the books: Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment," Alan Jay Epstein's "Inquest," Leo Sauvage's "The Oswald Affair," Harold Weisberg's "Whitewash," Sylvan Fox's "The Unanswered Questions," Thomas Buchanan's "Who Killed Kennedy?" and Richard Popkin's "The Second Oswald."

And the new mood has even found its playwright — in 26-year-old Barbara Garson, whose parody-play "MacBird" is scheduled to open off-Broadway next month.

Several major publishers turned it down. KPFA refused to play it on the air. And the current edition, an underground best-seller, was privately published. The name of the publisher: The Grassy Knoll Press.

(Ramparts now has the rights, and will publish it in full next month.)

"Deliciously seditious," wrote Village Voice drama critic Jack Newfield. "Of Swiftian dimensions."

Chief victim of Miss Garson's "magnificent malice" is President Johnson. "The nub of the play," says Newfield, "is that Johnson is the ambitious Macbeth who is responsible for the murder of Duncan John F. Kennedy. To add 'nuance,' MacBird is also made vaguely responsible for Adlai Stevenson's death and Edward Kennedy's plane crash of 1961. The message is that Johnson is the incarnation of evil."

Who is Barbara Garson? The bright, intense wife of Marvin Garson — an "investigator" for Mark Lane.

On the Horizon

But the game is just beginning. Still to come are:

- A movie by Mark Lane and Emile de Antonio, the man who made the documentary on the Army-McCarthy hearings, "Point of Order."
- Lane's play — a mock trial of Oswald in two acts, the first presenting the case for the prosecution, the second for the defense.
- A book in defense of the Warren Commission, by Wesley J. Liebeler, UCLA law professor and former Commission counsel.
- A possible court battle between Liebeler and Lane, over Liebeler's charge that Lane is a professional liar who runs around the country "telling lies for money."
- The most extravagantly heralded book in publishing history — William Manchester's "*The Death of a President.*"

(Those who expect bombshells from the book, however, will be disappointed; Lyndon Johnson does not exactly emerge as a second King Solomon, but there is little criticism of the Warren Commission.)

Parlor Game

Meantime, it is obvious that the intellectual parlor game called "Who Killed Kennedy?" which has been popular in Europe ever since 1963, has finally crossed the Atlantic, is definitely catching on and daily gaining popularity in the U.S. — where it should have been played to the finish in the first place.

How is it possible that today, 36 months after the tragic event, the doubts are more virulent than ever? How is it conceivable that the Warren Commission, with an unlimited budget and access to all the investigative forces of the Federal Government, with a full-time staff of 26 — among them some of the ablest legal minds in the nation — could have composed an 888-page report, with 26 volumes (17,815 pages) of supporting testimony — and still not have dispelled the doubts?

To answer that question, it may be necessary to abandon criminology in favor of psychology — and to ponder not the merits of the case, but the nature of belief and disbelief.

S. F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle